An axiom I have repeated often during over two decades of teaching business ethics is that there is great job security for business ethicists given that there is no shortage of new cases to study. If it wasn’t enough that ethical foibles by individuals and corporations provided a continuous stream of fodder for ethical analysis, the burgeoning universe of e-commerce has added a whole new technological dimension to business ethics that has left scholars scrambling to catch up. However, e-business does not just represent the next phase in commerce with novel moral issues. The technological advancements are challenging our conceptions of many of the fundamental tenets of liberal theory such as the nature of private property and the definition of privacy. These challenges can have far reaching ethical implications: the tail not only wags the dog, but may redefine the dog.

The issues that arise out of e-business are ethically and theoretically compelling but the increasingly common use of e-business makes the need for moral analysis pragmatically pertinent. For example, e-commerce is one of the most visible and widely used aspects of e-business. From items that only a few years ago consumers would never have dreamed of purchasing online, such as clothes, to purchasing items that only exist virtually, such as buying new hair for an avatar on Second Life, no one can sell a product any more without considering a web presence. With online retail sales approaching $200 billion annually in the U.S., a small but dramatically expanding percentage of overall retail sales, online commerce is clearly not a fringe endeavor. Of course, commerce is only one aspect of e-business. Electronic communications, reporting, and document management are now routine aspects of virtually all business large and small.

Given the current developments in electronic business, the need for the discussions that take place in Ethical Issues in E-Business: Models and Frameworks obviates themselves. Although business ethics books are abundant, and some of them have chapters on e-business, and there are plenty of texts on e-business, Ethical Issues in E-Business is one of the first book-length treatments of the range of moral issues that arise as a result of these new technological developments in business. What is so exciting about this fresh collection of articles is not only the tremendous breadth of topics addressed but also the international flavor of the authors involved. E-business is a global phenomenon that is redefining international trade in a manner that cannot be easily captured in traditional categories of analysis. The contributors to this volume represent a variety of disciplines and yet write in an accessible style so that one does not need specialized knowledge to grasp the gravity and implications of the issues addressed. And let me emphasize, the seriousness of the discussions that take place in this book by addressing the postmodern moment.

In the 1990’s a brief intellectual dialogue took place over the nature and potential of postmodern business ethics. The discussion began with Ronald M. Green’s contention in “Business Ethics As A Postmodern Phenomenon” that business ethics is postmodern because it “rejects unitary or totalizing
explanations of reality” and it values “de-centering’ of perspective and discovery of ‘otherness,’ ‘difference’ and marginality as valid modes of approach to experience” (1993). Green’s article provoked responses by David M. Rasmussen in “Business Ethics and Postmodernism: A Response” (1993) and Clarence C. Walton in “Business Ethics and Postmodernism: A Dangerous Dalliance” (1993). Neither of the responses was as sanguine about describing business ethics as a postmodern project. Rasmussen and Walton found postmodern analysis lacking in various ways. Andrew Gustafson, although sharing some skepticism about postmodernism, describes how postmodernism can serve as a tool of business ethics inquiry in “Making Sense of Postmodern Ethics” (2000). Although this was an important and fruitful discussion about the relationship of postmodernism to business ethics, these articles focused on ethical analysis as postmodern. What the authors failed to anticipate was that the field of business was about to enter a postmodern era because of the digital revolution. On the one hand, 

Ethical Issues in E-Business is a volume that addresses ethical issues that have arisen because of technological advances, but at a deeper level, this text is confronting the postmodern turn in contemporary business. Representing more than just new practices and policies, electronic business is presenting challenges to fundamental categories and values.

In many ways, the shift from traditional forms of business to e-business is characteristically postmodern with the changes creating new epistemological and ethical challenges. A cursory look at a few of the topics covered in Ethical Issues in E-Business reveals that because of the complex facets of internet connectivity, business is no longer in the black-and-white confines of Kansas anymore. In “The Ethical Implications of A/B and Multivariate E-Commerce Optimization Testing,” J.J. Silvia IV, reveals not only that business ethicists must become familiar with the new language of e-business, but that new information transmission challenges existing categories. Specifically, are websites information and purchasing portals or advertising? Commercial advertising is the source of long standing ethical debate and regulation, but how should web-based communication be assessed and regulated, if at all? Similarly, in “Privacy Revisited: From Lady Godiva’s Peeping Tom to Facebook’s Beacon Program,” Kirsten Martin reexamines issues of privacy given what she describes as the “greased” and “sticky” nature of personal information in this age of technology. Information can get away from protected control and yet it can also be collected and aggregated. What does it mean to place personal information on the web when that information can take on a life of its own? What I have called the postmodern shift in challenging traditional categories, Susan Emens, in “The New Paradigms of Business on the Internet and Its Ethical Implications” describes as a new paradigm. The changes will not be contained in e-business but will spread to all aspects of commerce, and eventually, all of social life.

There may be some who wish to compartmentalize Ethical Issues in E-Business as only of interest to business practitioners or business ethicists, however business is merely at the forefront of the melding of technology and self definition. The issues raised here regarding the renegotiation of foundational concepts given a digitally enhanced future have wide ranging implications far beyond narrow business concerns. In 1991, Donna Haraway anticipated the pending technological revolution and its postmodern implications in her discussion of cyborgs, human/machine hybrids: “Cyborg imagery can help express two crucial arguments in this essay: first, the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality, probably always, but certainly now; and second, taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts (p, 181)” Ethical Issues in E-Business can also be read as an important discussion in “reconstructing the boundaries of daily life.”
REFERENCES


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